

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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McGarvey 202/343-5634

"CRITICAL HABITAT" PROPOSED FOR MISSISSIPPI SANDHILL CRANE

About 100,000 acres of land in Jackson County, Mississippi, where the endangered Mississippi sandhill cranes live, have been proposed by Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for designation as "critical habitat."

This is the first such proposal made by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the public is invited to comment.

Interested persons may participate in this rulemaking by submitting written comments to the Director (FWS/LE), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 19183, Washington, D.C. 20036. All comments received through October 6, 1975, will be considered. Comments received will be available for public inspection during normal business hours in Suite 600, 1612 K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.

The proposed critical habitat is a five-sided area of land, water, and airspace in Jackson County, Mississippi, bordered generally on the east by the West Pascagoula River, on the west by the Jackson-Harrison County line, on the south by U.S. Route 90, and on the north by a line running north of Vancleave, Mississippi.

This proposal is required by the Endangered Species Act because another Federal agency--the Federal Highway Administration--is involved in authorizing, funding, and carrying out actions which could result in the modification or destruction of habitat frequented by these endangered birds. If the habitat is finally determined to be critical, the Federal

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Highway Administration is required by law to take whatever action may be necessary to insure that its program will not result in the destruction or modification of the habitat.

It recently became evident that an emergency situation existed with respect to the Mississippi sandhill crane. Therefore, on June 30, 1975, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director made an "emergency determination" of critical habitat for the Mississippi sandhill crane and published it in the Federal Register. An imminent threat of habitat destruction was created by the construction of a new segment of Interstate Highway 10 in Mississippi.

This current notice of proposed rulemaking is being initiated now because under the Endangered Species Act the emergency determination can remain in effect for only 120 days following its publication in the Federal Register.

The area being proposed for designation as critical habitat is privately owned and is the last remaining area containing the only known population of the Mississippi sandhill crane. Private development on private land is not prohibited by the Endangered Species Act of 1973, but Federal agency action that would violate critical habitat is specifically forbidden by that law.

This bird is non-migratory and confines its movements largely within the boundaries proposed for designation as critical, though there may be some wandering outside of the area. The population probably survived here because the land occupied was long considered unmanageable for agriculture, timber, or residential purposes, and consequently received little development or disturbance. The area in recent years has been increasingly subjected to various land uses including intensive forestry, residential development, and highways, thus resulting in further jeopardy to the sandhill crane and its habitat.

Nesting occurs in seven known places which together compose approximately 10 percent of the total area delineated. The nesting grounds are mostly in the vicinity of the right-of-way of Interstate Highway 10, portions of which may be under construction in the near future. They consist mostly of swamps, wet savanna, and open pine. It is the wet, open character of the land, plus the relative lack of disturbance, that make the area suitable for the crane.

In addition to the nesting grounds, there is a large winter roosting site in Pascagoula Marsh in the eastern part of the delineated area. Also, during the winter, the cranes utilize farmland in the northern part of the area for feeding. At other times of the year, the birds may feed and roost in the vicinity of the breeding grounds. Regular movement occurs, of course, between the various nesting, roosting, and feeding sites. All the suitable habitat within the area proposed for designation is currently used by, or has potential for future use by, the Mississippi sandhill crane.

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